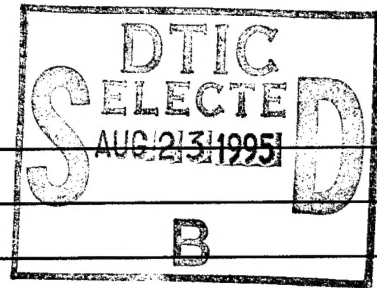


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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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MISSING FROM THE TOOLBOX: PREEMPTIVE STRIKE

by

Marc J. Thomas
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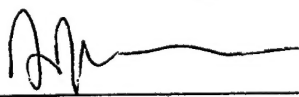
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: 

09 November 1995

Paper directed by Captain D. Watson
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ABSTRACT

The national security strategy of the United States requires the military to be able to prosecute two nearly simultaneous major regional conflicts. This is similar to the Israeli asymmetric strategy of fighting one enemy while holding another. Once the first is defeated, Israeli attention focuses on defeating the second enemy. To make the strategy work, the Israelis preemptively strike their enemies to compensate for disadvantages. American national strategy does not include a provision for preemptive action, yet certain regional U.S. commanders are disadvantaged too.

Past American wars, including the Persian Gulf War, relied on a significant build-up of regional combat power before taking offensive action. An enemy might conclude that the best way to fight the United States is to isolate the region from the introduction of U.S. forces. A combination of sea mines and an anti-air lift plan could keep U.S. forces from a theater.

Because sea mining is likely to be part of an initial enemy action, preempting sea mining operations is as important as gaining air superiority. Once sea mines are placed, it will take significant time to conduct mine counter-measures operations. An enemy with a clearly defined objective and good diplomatic initiative could use the time that the U.S. was isolated from the theater to gain a peace on its terms.

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THESIS

There is a flaw in the national security strategy of the United States. It comes from the American experience in the Persian Gulf War, but has links to an earlier time in American history. The flaw is the assumption that a regional U.S. commander will be able to get reinforcements into theater. That assumption has an impact on the requirement that calls for the military "to help defeat aggression in two nearly simultaneous major regional conflicts."¹

The United States is unique because it "is the only nation capable of conducting large-scale and effective military operations far beyond its borders."² In order to carry out this task, the military maintains an overseas presence. While some U.S. forces are stationed overseas, some areas of potential conflict only have a U.S. force presence through ship deployments and during scheduled military exercises. In all crises, American involvement will depend on reinforcement from outside respective regions.³

For a potential enemy to deny U.S. forces access to a region, it would have to launch a preventive war. Usually, a preventive war is planned in advance. Realizing that over time the U.S. could build up enough combat power to eventually force its way into most areas, the enemy would attack before the regional balance of power shifted against it. In contrast, preemptive strikes are usually the result of a crisis, such as enemy preparation for a preventive war. The

alternative to allowing an enemy the advantage and initiative gained by starting hostilities in a superior position is to launch preemptive strikes.⁴

LOOKING FOR AN AMERICAN CENTER OF GRAVITY

An enemy of the United States could draw some valuable lessons and conclusions from the Persian Gulf War. First, the United States prefers to fight only after it has built up what it believes to be sufficient countervailing ground forces in a region. Second, the preferred, modern American way of war is to establish air superiority before committing ground forces to battle.⁵ Third, while its victory over Iraq supposedly overcame the post-Vietnam reluctance to combat, Americans are still very casualty conscious.⁶

A potential enemy determined to fight a war that may involve the United States needs to capture or destroy anything that would allow or assist the introduction or reinforcement of U.S. forces. Arguably, the single most important mistake made by Iraq was not advancing into Saudi Arabia when it invaded Kuwait. From August 1990 until January 1991, U.S. forces were allowed virtually undisturbed access to Saudi Arabian airfields and seaports. In that time, the coalition freely massed the combat power needed to expel Iraq from Kuwait.⁷

Air lift delivered over 500,000 passengers to Saudi Arabia, roughly 99 percent of the total. At the beginning of OPERATION DESERT SHIELD, the U.S. strategic air lift fleet

consisted of 265 C-141s and 126 C-5s. To sustain military air lift crews, 18,000 reservists augmented the Military Airlift Command (MAC). Eventually, activated reserve units made up more than 80 percent of all Air Force lift assets. The Civil Reserve Air Fleet augmented MAC with 77 long-range international (LRI) passenger aircraft and 38 LRI cargo aircraft. Commercial air lift delivered 64 percent of the air passengers and 27 percent of the air cargo. The key to the success of both the military and commercial air lift effort was the use of pre-existing overflight rights, intermediate airports en route and state-of-the-art airports in theater.⁸

Sea lift brought 95 percent of all equipment and supplies to U.S. forces during OPERATIONS DESERT SHIELD and STORM. The transit time for sea lift from the east coast of the United States through the Suez canal to the Persian Gulf region is approximately thirty days. The ships came from four sources, the Military Sea lift Command's (MSC) Ready Reserve Force (RRF), MSC's Fast Sea lift Ships (FSS), afloat and maritime pre-positioning ships (APS/MPS), and chartered merchant ships. RRF ships are maintained in an inactive status for five, 10 or 20 day recall. Only 12 of the initial 44 RRF ships met activation time requirements. Only six of 27 follow-on RRF ships activated within specified times.

Normally on a 96 hour standby, the first FSS was ready in 48 hours. Because they can average 27 knots, FSS ships are ideal for rapid response requirements. Even though it was one

of the first and more important divisions ordered to the Persian Gulf via FSS, it still took from 10 August until the end of September 1990 to fully deploy the Twenty-fourth Mechanized Infantry Division from the United States to Saudi Arabia.

APS and MPS ships allowed the initial U.S. ground forces in theater to have more than an infantry fighting capability within ten days of alert. Limited in numbers, but located at points around the world, the MPS located in Diego Garcia enabled a brigade size Marine unit airlifted from Camp Pendleton California to join with forward deployed equipment sea lifted to Saudi Arabia. Like FSS, APS and MPS are ideal for rapid response, but sea lift takes time regardless of geographic location.⁹

From studying the American build-up in the Persian Gulf region prior to OPERATION DESERT STORM, a potential enemy might conclude that the best way to fight U.S. forces is to keep them from the region. To prevent or delay the introduction of forces, an enemy could target critical vulnerabilities that relate to the U.S. center of gravity, such as air lift. An unusual approach, it is not out of the realm of possibility. A criticism of Iraq in OPERATION DESERT STORM specifically stated, "the Iraqi Air Force could have launched massed or even suicide attacks against high-value coalition targets like AWACS and tankers."¹⁰

With imagination and determination, the enemy could devise an effective counter-air plan, even with limited assets. Instead of countering U.S. combat aircraft, enemy fighter aircraft would target air lift aircraft once they entered the theater. Particularly vulnerable in approach to and after take off from airports, aircraft could be ambushed by enemy special operations forces (SOF) using shoulder fired surface-to-air missiles both inside and outside the theater.

Because there are a limited number of air lift aircraft and air crews, losses would have a negative impact on the overall effort. The destruction of civilian airliners contracted to move military personnel would have a psychological and economic impact as well. It would inflict heavy losses on U.S. ground forces well before they were committed to battle.

As a result, U.S. combat aircraft already in the region would have to divert their efforts from targeting the enemy to escorting air lift aircraft. Any preliminary U.S. ground forces already forward deployed would be at least partially committed to guarding airfields vice countering the initial enemy thrusts. Enemy actions that downed air lift aircraft at intermediate airports would cause foreign internal problems that could result in the cancellation of overflight and landing rights.

Concurrently, the capture of air ports would be important objectives for enemy ground forces. If denied the use of land

based airfields in the region, U.S. troops would have to enter the region by sea lift. Additionally, the U.S. would find its preferred method of starting a counter-offensive, through air superiority, much more difficult.

To prevent or delay the introduction of sea lift into theater, an enemy could make extensive use of a relatively cheap and difficult to defeat weapon, the sea mine. In the Persian Gulf War, Iraqi sea mines were a major factor in deterring the U.S. Navy from an amphibious assault across the Kuwaiti coastline.¹¹ Offensive mining by Iraq against seaports in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates could have isolated the Persian Gulf from timely reinforcement. It would have extended the coalition overland supply line to the Red Sea.

A more extensive plan would have included mining the Straits of Hormuz, Red Sea ports and the Suez Canal. In the extreme, Iraq could have attempted to mine MPS anchorages and selected U.S. seaports by merchant ship with the aim of blocking the movement of ground force supply and equipment. Substituting the Iranians or North Koreans as enemies are possible in similar scenarios in their respective geographic regions.

By using sea mines, an enemy would exploit a warfare area that the U.S. Navy has shown historical weakness. Since the end of World War II, thirteen U.S. Navy ships have been damaged in combat, nine by sea mines.¹² After the end of the

Vietnam War, the U.S. Navy relied primarily on its allies for mine counter-measures until the re-flag of Kuwaiti oil tankers as part of OPERATION EARNEST WILL in 1987.

Since then, the Navy consolidated its mine counter-measures forces under one proponent, modernized its aviation and surface ship capabilities, forward deployed some surface mine counter-measures ships and slowly improved. Unfortunately, U.S. Navy mine counter-measures assets have yet to be integrated fully into fleet exercises and deployments. As a result, there is a lack of mine warfare knowledge in the fleet.

While aviation mine counter-measures (AMCM) assets could be operational in theater within days of alert, they compete for limited U.S. airlift assets.¹³ In a time of crisis, a regional commander will be faced with determining the priority between AMCM assets and combat forces for immediate deployment to theater. Surface mine counter-measures forces will take roughly 30 days to deploy to a theater from the United States.¹⁴ The availability of allied mine counter-measures forces will vary depending on the theater and political circumstances. Even under ideal conditions, mine reconnaissance and mine sweeping takes time. The amount of time will vary depending on the extent of the mine fields, the mine counter-measures assets available and the enemy re-mining effort.

Time is what the theater commander does not have. An extensive enemy mine laying barrage could effectively isolate a theater from sea lift. An enemy intent on using weapons of mass destruction could use mines to channelize U.S. reinforcements to pre-targeted ports. The enemy gains the initiative once the first offensive mines are laid. The psychological impact of a suspected mine field or actual mine versus ship detonation is immense.¹⁵ The best way to combat this potentially debilitating threat is to prevent the mines from being laid.

In summation, an enemy that synchronized the use of sea mines, combat aircraft and SOF as operational fires could stop or significantly delay U.S. air lift or sea lift. If coordinated with an enemy ground offensive that includes the capture or destruction of airports and seaports, it could effectively isolate the theater from U.S. response. An enemy with a clearly defined objective and good diplomatic initiative could use the time that the U.S. was isolated from the theater to gain peace on its terms. The alternative to giving the enemy the initiative is to preemptively strike. The United States and a regional U.S. commander faced a similar situation in 1941.

MISSED PREEMPTION: GEN MACARTHUR IN THE PHILIPPINES

On 7 December 1941, Japan started a preventive war. An imperialist power at the time, Japan was enlarging its Manchurian empire by invading parts of China and French Indo-

China.¹⁶ Wanting to remain the dominant power in the Pacific, the Japanese believed that they had a limited window of opportunity before the balance of power in the Pacific shifted from Japan to the United States. The Japanese based their decision to launch a preventive war on three major factors.

First, the United States placed an embargo on oil to Japan. U.S. oil had been Japan's sole source of oil. Japan had limited oil reserves. It had a limited time to get another oil source by capturing the Dutch East Indies.¹⁷

Second, the U.S. Pacific Fleet was weaker than the Japanese Fleet. The Japanese knew that the primary American interest was the war in Europe. The American Rainbow Five strategy had shifted some U.S. Pacific Fleet assets to the U.S. Atlantic Fleet in preparation for a war with Germany. At the time, the United States did not have enough assets to prosecute two major regional conflicts.¹⁸

Third, while it would never live up to expectations, B-17 bombers were being stationed in the Philippines. If the United States worked out an agreement with the Soviet Union for access to its airfields, the Japanese home islands would be within bombing range. B-17s would also threaten the Japanese sea lines of communications with the soon-to-be-captured Dutch East Indies. The Philippines became a primary objective.¹⁹

On 8 December 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, GEN MacArthur failed to use assigned B-17s to preemptively strike Japanese forces on Formosa. Between the time of the Pearl Harbor attack and the time that Japanese forces on Formosa planned air strikes on the Philippines, fog stopped Japanese air operations for six hours. There was no adverse weather over the Philippines. For some reason, GEN MacArthur never authorized the air strikes. As a result, 16 fully loaded B-17s and over 85 other aircraft were later caught on the ground in a Japanese air raid and destroyed. This included all but one of the available bombers and over one third of the available fighters.²⁰

The missed opportunity to preempt the initial Japanese offensive would not have saved the Philippines. There were no reinforcements from outside the region available to help fight the invasion. Still, an effective use of air power against air, sea and eventually land forces would have made the invasion more costly and time consuming for the Japanese.

If reinforcements had been available, preemptive strikes may have given American forces in the Philippines the edge needed to last until relieved. While there may not be a successful American example of preemption, there is a successful and modern example. It has parallels for application in present U.S. strategy.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES WITH THE ISRAELIS

Probably the best known and most successful use of a preemptive strike in a modern war is the 1967 Six Day Arab-Israeli War. There are similarities between Israel in 1967 and the regional commanders facing North Korea, Iran and Iraq. Like Israel, U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) have qualitative advantages and quantitative disadvantages vis-a-vis their respective threats. Israeli and U.S. forces are better trained than their respective enemies.²¹ All three depend on reinforcement; Israel from reserve mobilization, USFK and USCENTCOM from outside their respective geographic regions.²² For different reasons, all three are more vulnerable to protracted wars of attrition than their enemies; Israel due to the impact on its economy and the United States due to its public's intolerance for casualties.²³ Only in the area of equipment is the U.S. military superior to its threats as compared to that of Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

At the operational level, there are similarities between the Israeli and American modern ways of war. Both stress the importance of achieving air superiority to the point where "dominance of the air practically assured dominance of the ground...".²⁴ The opening salvos of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War came from the Israeli Air Force as it destroyed its greatest threat, the Egyptian Air Force, mostly on the ground. While air superiority operations took place throughout

OPERATION DESERT STORM, in reality, it was achieved during the first hours of the war.²⁵

On the ground, both emphasize taking and maintaining the offensive, an indirect strategy of encirclement, and shock action. In 1967, Israel left comparatively weaker forces to screen Egyptian forces in the southern Sinai while the main Israeli force maneuvered to breakthrough and encircle the northern Sinai. This forced the Egyptians in southern Sinai to withdraw.²⁶ In OPERATION DESERT STORM, the original plan was similar. The Marines were positioned to fight a holding action while the Army swung around and encircled Iraqi forces.²⁷ In this case, the enemy collapsed on both fronts.

At the strategic level, there is an important similarity between Israel and the United States. While the survival of the United States is not threatened, regions important to the United States could be overwhelmed before the U.S. could react. As stated before, the United States is unique because it "is the only nation capable of conducting large-scale and effective military operations far beyond its borders."²⁸ Because it is surrounded by potential enemies, Israel has always had to be ready to fight multiple enemies.

In order to win with limited military resources, Israel has fought asymmetrically. In 1967, it took the offensive first against the Egyptians while defending and holding in the east. Then, once the Egyptians were defeated, Israel attacked

Jordan, then Syria.²⁹ Israel fought and won three nearly simultaneous campaigns.

The major and potentially critical difference between an Israeli and American comparison is that Israel usually has all of its combat power located directly adjacent to its enemies. It always enjoys interior lines and closer links with its operational logistics base. Israel always fights in a mature theater.

In a future conflict, USFK and USCENTCOM not only have to be concerned with the advance of enemy forces, but the distinct possibility that they could be isolated from reinforcement. Especially in the Persian Gulf region, U.S. forces may fight in an immature theater, without an established logistics base. While Israel has been nearly surrounded in most of its wars, it has never been cut off from either operational reinforcement or strategic replenishment.

Second, at least in the 1967 war, Israel ensured that it was able to execute its asymmetric strategy because it took the initiative by preemptively striking its enemies. In the hours and days leading up to the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel received late indications of the impending conflict. Because of political considerations with regard to possible negative American reaction to another preemptive strike, Israel ceded the initiative to the Arabs.³⁰ Israel managed to defend itself, but the consequences were high casualties and desperate, defensive battles for survival on two fronts.

While the Yom Kippur War ended with Israel beginning to go on a counter-offensive, it came at significant cost. The position Israel found itself in 1973 is not the position Americans want to put their forces in a future crisis.

THE PROBLEMS WITH PREEMPTION

Potential enemies know that Americans have difficulty with striking first. It is not part of the American culture to be the initiator of a major conflict. In the aftermath of the cold war, most Americans do not perceive a threat that would justify a preemptive strike.

Internationally, there is a problem with preemption. Many times preemptive action will be unilateral. It will open the country to question, criticism and condemnation of its actions. When many countries are trying to establish international guidelines for peaceful crisis resolution, preemptive strikes seem a throwback to a violent era.

Operationally, the intelligence that initiates preemption in assistance to a third party may not be believed. It may reveal sensitive intelligence sources. The intelligence may be wrong.

CONCLUSION

The United States has a national security strategy that is similar to an Israeli strategy that relies on preemption to succeed. Fighting two nearly simultaneous major regional conflicts is similar to the Israeli asymmetric strategy of fighting one enemy while holding the other. To gain the

advantage and initiative, the Israelis attack first.

Reinforcement may prove to be a regional U.S. commander's center of gravity. A sophisticated employment of sea mines in conjunction with an aggressive anti-air lift effort by the enemy may succeed in isolating a region. Just as the Japanese believed in 1941, in regions where U.S. force levels are kept to a minimum, an enemy may believe that the regional balance of power is in its favor and launch a preventive war.

Preemptive strikes will give a regional commander the time to receive reinforcements, reduce the enemy and establish a more favorable regional balance of power. Targeting priorities should concentrate on enemy capabilities that would deny U.S. forces access to the theater: naval forces with emphasis on destroying mine warfare capability and air forces. Many of these targets will be in the littoral. At this stage of the conflict, enemy ground forces would be targeted only if they moved towards a friendly border.

American policy makers will have to sell the idea of preemptive strikes to the American public. The alternative may be what American forces in the Philippines in 1941 experienced, or what the Israeli's in the 1973 Yom Kippur War experienced. While the American public dislikes striking first, it dislikes casualties and defeat less.

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